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ABSTRACT

As the semester progresses, students in an autobiographical writing class at Slippery Rock University (Pennsylvania) develop a new awareness of themselves and their own places in a larger universe as well as an appreciation of themselves as writers. Language theory supports what the instructor observes in her students' writing development. A series of class writing assignments (designed to help students move their vision both inward and outward through language) make up the first half of the semester. The second half of the semester is spent writing and sharing a biography of the student writer's choice. The first time the biographies were assigned, at least two-thirds of the students wrote about family members rather than a notable person, as the instructor expected. Because all work is placed in a portfolio, and because all students in the class share their stories for their portfolios, the students arrive at an appreciation and a greater awareness of their unique history and the histories of others. (Two figures illustrating aspects of writing are included.) (RS)

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Remembering Our Roots, Writing Our Stories: Theortetical Underpinings of Auto/biographical Writing 310

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Remembering Our Roots, Writing Our Stories: Theortetical Underpinings of Auto/biographical Writing 310

Priscilla Kelly

I never fail to be amazed by the people who enroll in my Auto/biographical writing classes. These students are typical traditional and non-traditional S.R.U. students as far as the registrar is concerned. But the nature of our writing in Auto/biographical Writing allows us to catch a glimpse of and begin to appreciate the extraordinary experiences and families that most people possess. I think students themselves are often amazed at their heritage once they have been forced to write it down, shape it and present it to others. The challenge of autobiography 310, then, becomes the task of clarifying and interpreting ones past and then presenting it convincingly to a reader. From my students in this class, I have learned that through engaging in this difficult process, the autobiographical writer begins to look at her life from a different perspective and to evaluate where she has been and what she has accomplished. Furthermore, I see developing in much of my students' work as the semester progresses, a new awareness of themselves and their own places in a larger universe as well as an appreciation of themselves as writers.

Language theory supports what I observe in my students' writing development. The theoretical underpinnings of this course have come from major scholars in the writing discipline, James Kinneavy and James Britton and his team who spent four years observing writing in the British schools. Britton and his team studied writing in the English schools and published their findings in The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18) In this study, Britton and his team argue for the importance of expressive, or personal writing as the basis for the development of writing ability in all genres. Expressive writing is described by Britton et al. as utterance that stays close to the speaker(82). Indeed, Britton describes the team's increasing conviction that the expressive mode of writing is the basis of all writing ability.

> It must be admitted that the more we worked on this idea of the expressive function, the more important we felt it to be. Not only is it the mode in which we approach and relate to each other in speech,but it is also the mode in which, generally speaking, we frame the tentative first drafts of new ideas...it must surely be the most accessible form in which to write, since family conversation will have provided (the writer) with a familiar model. Furthermore, a writer who envisages his reader as someone with whom he is on intimate terms must surely have very favorable conditions for using the process of writing as a means of exploration and discovery. (82)

Britton presents a matrix showing that the expressive is the basis from which differentiated forms of mature writing are developed.

[See MATRIX: Fig. 3]

Brittons's matrix indicates a movement from an intimate to a more public audience as students write more and more to perform transactional or poetic functions (i.e., in both cases writing for others.) Britton goes on to argue that linguistic competence embraces both grammatical rules and rules of usage, and he indicates that as a writer moves from the expressive into the transactional, he increasingly takes over responsibility for and develops the ability to perform according to the standard modes of organization by which we encode experience (85).

In our textbook, Autobiography, Robert Lyons observes that writing autobiography gives each of us a chance to root our language in our own self awareness, and from this source to

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develop a personal voice in our writing, one that should survive as identifiably ours even when we take on more impersonal topics. I point out to my students as we begin to talk about developing "voice" that part of the Graduate Record Exam in English is to identify quotations from famous American and English writers. This is possible, I point out, because famous writers have unique and identificable voices.

One of James Kinneavy's purposes in his important work, A Theory of Discourse (1971) is to reassert the seminal role of expressive writing in the development of a writer's voice, and the importance of inclusion of the opportunity to use language in constructing, or reconstructing, ourselves. Kinneavy believes that

> expressive discourse is, in a very important sense, psychologically prior to all the other uses of language. It is the expressive component which gives all discourse a personal significance to the speaker or listener. Indeed, the expressive component of discourse is what involves a man with the world and his fellows to give him his unique brand of humanity. The ignoring by the disciplines of speech and English, of the very kind of discourse by which an individual or group can express his personal or its societal aspirations, is certainly a symptom, if not an effect, of the impersonality of the university machines of the present day. (396)

Kinneavy bases his theory of writing development on the philosophy of of Jean Paul Sartre and the phenomonologist philosophers. He characterizes the self as being constituted by combinations of the different aspects of self or to use Kinneavy's terms, as derived from the phenomonologist philosophers, Being-for-itself, Being for others, and Being in the world.

[See Figure VI, 1: The Components of Self-Expression]

Kinneavy explains this version of the communication triangle. In Being-for -itself , we are what we are conscious of being in the face of reality; we are what we have made of ourselves in the past; finally, we are what we are striving to be. Being for others is constituted by the way others view me, and Being in the world offers still a further dimension to the writer's consciousness of her own being in the world and the summation of possibilities offered by the world. To attain selfhood, therefore, the "For Itself" must necessarily involve itself with others and with the world, and see itself doing so (401).

When I began teaching Auto/biographical Writing 310 at Slippery Rock University, I had always enjoyed reading biographies and autobiographies as well as shorter biographical pieces such as "Profiles" in *The New Yorker.* As I began reading for and thinking about the course, I realized how many genres incorporated biographical or autobiographical narrative in commanding ways, and I started to think about how much more instructive it would be to design the class around those events that shape our lives as opposed to beginning at the beginning with data about parents, placeof birth, etc. I designed the class so that it would mirror Kinneavy's language theory of self/other/world, and so that it would give students the opportunity to show their own emergence from self to other to world awareness. At the same time I hoped to encourage my students to emphasize those events which had shaped their lives and helped them recognize their unique places in the American landscape.

I had discovered while teaching Creative Writing that one way to get students to approach challenging writing tasks was to break the tasks down. I therefore designed a series of class writing assignments based on the readings from Robert Lyon textbook, *Autobiography.* A series of class writing assignments make up the first half of the semester: to interview a classmate the first night of class and write out the interview; to write a letter about something that matters in your life; to write about a beginning, about an event, to describe a meaningful place, to describe a person who has influenced you, and finally, to write about an event about which you have

achieved perspective. These assignments are intended to serve as catalysts to help the student move her vision both inward and outward through language and shape past experiences based on what the writer's own memory establishes as vivid and meaningful. As Robert Lyons has written, "Any writer's explanation of what happened is from the beginning a creative shaping of past experience based on what his own memory establishes as vivid and meaningful. Once the writer recognizes that memory is the storehouse of the memorable, he can call upon his memory as a creative resource" (109).

The second half of the semester is spent writing and sharing a biography of the writer's choice. The natural extension of writing autobiography is writing biography. If, as Kinneavy suggest, our writer's voice develops in relation to self, other and world, it would, then, be desirable to have adstudents in the class conclude by researching and writing about another as they had written about themselves. The first time I assigned the biographies I envisioned students researching a notable person, probably someone unrelated to themselves. You can imagine my surprise when at least two-thirds of the class chose to write about members of their own families. I was horrified since each student presents a twenty minute oral report about her biographical subject. How many grandmothers could we stand to hear about!

How wrong I was. First, I was and continue to be amazed at the relatives that my students have. They come with stories that amaze complete with documentation in old pictures, diaries, awards. I ask them to read at least one book that will familiarize them with the context of their subject's life, and I think you will recognize how much depth Rosella's extensive research into the Italian migration to Buffalo gave to her grandparents' story.

Whether students choose to study someone whom they admire (historical or living) or a family member, there is no doubt that writing the biography extends the writing experience to the expository realm, the writing task being to bring another person to life for a reader, or as Lorenzo Carcaterra, commenting on David McCullough's new biography of Truman, to write like a novelist, dig like a zealous reporter and put things in perspective like a superb historian (1).

Because all work is placed in a developing portfolio, and because all students in the class share their stories from their portfolios, the students arrives at an appreciation of and a greater awareness of her unique history and the histories of others and their value as part of our American Heritage. As we come to recognize the diversity that exists within the class, I include my own talk about Ellis Island, describing how this restored historical landmark presents a photographic history of the people of our land, people of all races and heritages beginning their lives in this great experiment.

The variety of student stories seems infinite; each is unique and important. Part of Auto/biographical writing's great strength is that students come to understand how it is diversity of culture and experience that has come together to make our great democratic experiment so dramatic and important. Furthermore, writing for Auto/biography 310 can help students gain a greater awareness of their own family stories, an important part of their "roots." As Kristin H. wrote in a class critique at the end of the semester, "before putting my autobiography together, I'd never realized what an impact my family has had on it."

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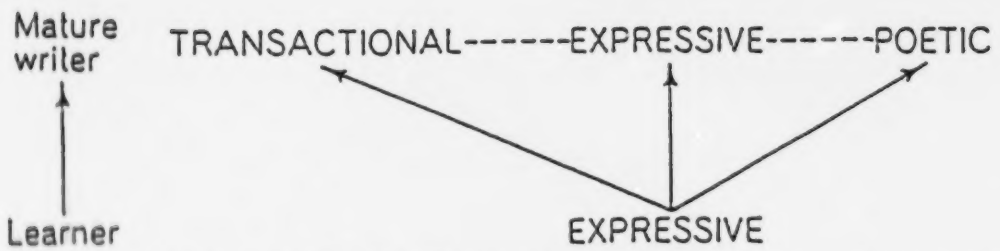

Fig. 3 The expressive as a matrix for the development of other forms of writing

Figure VI, 1: The Components of Self-Expression